

# AESCHYLUS

## AGAMEMNON

### CHARACTERS

A WATCHMAN

CHORUS *of twelve Elders of Argos*

CLYTEMNESTRA, *wife of Agamemnon*

A HERALD

AGAMEMNON, *king of Argos*

CASSANDRA, *a princess of Troy*

AEGISTHUS, *Clytemnestra's paramour, cousin to Agamemnon*  
*Soldiers attending Agamemnon; guards attending Aegisthus*

*It is night, a little before sunrise. On the roof of Atreus' palace a WATCHMAN stands, or rises from a small mattress placed on the hewn stone. In front of the palace are statues of Zeus, Apollo, and Hermes; each with an altar before it.*

WATCHMAN: O gods! grant me release from this long weary watch.

Release, O gods! Twelve full months now, night after night  
Dog-like I lie here, keeping guard from this high roof  
On Atreus' palace. The nightly conference of stars,  
Resplendent rulers, bringing heat and cold in turn,  
Studding the sky with beauty--I know them all, and watch  
them

Setting and rising; but the one light I long to see  
Is a new star, the promised sign, the beacon-flare  
To speak from Troy and utter one word, 'Victory!'--  
Great news for Clytemnestra, in whose woman's heart  
A man's will nurses hope.

Now once more, drenched with dew,  
I walk about; lie down, but no dreams visit me.  
Sleep's enemy, fear, stands guard beside me, to forbid  
My eyes one instant's closing. If I sing some tune--  
Since music's the one cure prescribed for heartsickness--  
Why, then I weep, to think how changed this house is now  
From splendor of old days, ruled by its rightful lord.  
So may the gods be kind and grant release from trouble,  
And send the fire to cheer this dark night with good news.

*The beacon shines out.*

O welcome beacon, kindling night to glorious day,  
Welcome! You'll set them dancing in every street in Argos  
When they hear your message. Ho there! Hullo! Call  
Clytemnestra!

The Queen must rise at once like Dawn from her bed, and  
welcome

The fire with pious words and a shout of victory,  
For the town of Ilion's ours--that beacon's clear enough!  
I'll be the first myself to start the triumphal dance.  
Now I can say the gods have blessed my master's hand;  
And for me too that beacon-light's a lucky throw.  
Now Heaven bring Agamemnon safe to his home! May I  
Hold his dear hand in mine! For the rest, I say no more;  
My tongue's nailed down. This house itself, if walls had  
words,

Would tell its story plainly. Well, I speak to those  
Who understand me; to the rest--my door is shut.

*He descends. Lights begin to appear in the palace. A cry of triumph is heard from CLYTEMNESTRA within, and is echoed by other women. Then from the palace a messenger hurries out*

*towards the city; attendants follow, going in various directions, and carrying jars and bowls with oil and incense for sacrifice. Then CLYTEMNESTRA enters from the palace, with two attendants; she casts incense on the altars, and prays before the statue of Zeus. Day begins to break. From the city enter the ELDERS OF ARGOS. They do not yet see CLYTEMNESTRA.*

CHORUS: Ten years have passed since the strong sons of  
Atreus,  
Menelaus and Agamemnon, both alike  
Honored by Zeus with throned and sceptered power,  
Gathered and manned a thousand Argive ships,  
And with the youth of Hellas under arms  
Sailed from these ports to Settle scores with Priam.

Then loud their warlike anger cried,  
As eagles cry, that wild with grief,  
On some steep, lonely mountain-side  
Above their robbed nest wheel and sail,  
Oaring the airy waves, and wail  
Their wasted toil, their watchful pride;  
Till some celestial deity,  
Zeus, Pan, Apollo, hears on high  
Their scream of wordless misery;  
And pitying their forlorn estate  
(Since air is Heaven's protectorate)  
Sends a swift Fury to pursue  
Marauding guilt with vengeance due.  
So against Paris's guilty boast  
Zeus, witness between guest and host,  
Sends Atreus' sons for stern redress  
Of his and Helen's wantonness.

Now Greece and Troy both pay their equal debt  
Of aching limbs and wounds and sweat,  
While knees sink low in gory dust,  
And spears are shivered at first thrust.  
Things are--as they are now; their end  
Shall follow Fate's decree, which none can bend.  
In vain shall Priam's altars burn,  
His rich libations vainly flow  
To gods above and powers below:  
No gift, no sacrificial flame  
Can soothe or turn  
The wrath of Heaven from its relentless aim.

We were too old to take our share  
With those who joined the army then.  
We lean on sticks--in strength not men  
But children; so they left us here.  
In weakness youth and age are one:  
The sap sleeps in the unripe bone  
As in the withered. The green stalk  
Grows without thorns: so, in the grey  
And brittle years, old men must walk  
Three-footed, weak as babes, and stray  
Like dreams lost in the light of day.

*Here the CHORUS-LEADER sees CLYTEMNESTRA.*

Daughter of Tyndareos, Queen Clytemnestra,  
What have you heard? What has happened?  
Why have you ordered  
Sacrifice through the city? Is there news?  
Altars of all the gods who guard our State,  
Gods of the sky, powers of the lower earth,  
Altars of town and country, blaze with offerings;  
On every hand heaven-leaping flames implore  
Anger to melt in gentleness--a glare  
Enriched with holy ointment, balm so rare  
As issues only from a royal store!  
Why are these things? Be gracious, Queen:  
Tell what you can, or what you may;  
Be healer of this haunting fear  
Which now like an enemy creeps near,  
And now again, when hope has seen  
These altars bright with promise, slinks away--  
Tell us, that hope may lift the load  
Which galls our souls by night and day,  
Sick with the evil which has been,  
The evil which our hearts forebode.

*CLYTEMNESTRA remains silent, her back turned  
to the CHORUS. They continue, addressing the  
audience.*

I am the man to speak, if you would hear  
The whole tale from its hopeful starting-place--  
That portent, which amazed our marching youth.  
It was ten years ago--but I was there.

The poet's grace, the singer's fire,  
Grow with his years; and I can still speak truth  
With the clear ring the gods inspire;--  
How those twin monarchs of our warlike race,  
Two leaders one in purpose, were sped forth--  
Their vengeful spears in thousands pointing North  
To Troy--by four wings' furious beat:  
Two kings of birds, that seemed to bode  
Great fortune to the kings of that great fleet.  
Close to the palace, on spear-side of the road,  
One tawny-feathered, one white in the tail,  
Perched in full view, they ravenously tear  
The body of a pregnant hare  
Big with her burden, now a living prey  
In the last darkness of their unborn day.  
*Cry Sorrow, sorrow--yet let good prevail!*

The army's learned Seer saw this, and knew  
The devourers of the hare  
For that relentless pair--  
Different in nature, as the birds in hue  
The sons of Atreus; and in council of war  
Thus prophesied: 'Your army, it is true,  
In time shall make King Priam's town their prey;  
Those flocks and herds Troy's priests shall slay  
With prayers for safety of her wall  
Perish in vain--Troy's violent doom shall swallow all.  
Only, see to it, you who go  
To bridle Trojan pride, that no  
Anger of gods benight your day  
And strike before your hulls are under way.  
For virgin Artemis, whom all revere,

Hates with a deadly hate  
The swift-winged hounds of Zeus who swooped to assail  
Their helpless victim wild with fear  
Before her ripe hour came;  
Who dared to violate  
(So warning spoke the priest)  
The awe that parenthood must claim,  
As for some rite performed in Heaven's name;  
Yes, Artemis abominates the eagles' feast!  
*Cry Sorrow, sorrow--yet let good prevail!*

Still spoke on the prophet's tongue:  
'Lovely child of Zeus, I pray,  
You who love the tender whelp  
Of the ravening lion, and care  
For the fresh-wild sucking young  
Of fox and rat and hind and hare;  
If ever by your heavenly help  
Hope of good was brought to flower,  
Bless the sign we saw today!  
Cancel all its presaged ill,  
All its promised good fulfill!  
Next my anxious prayers entreat  
Lord Apollo's healing power,  
That his Sister may not plan  
Winds to chain the Hellene fleet;  
That her grievance may not crave  
Blood to drench another grave  
From a different sacrifice  
Hallowed by no festal joy--  
Blood that builds a tower of hate,  
Mad blood raging to destroy

Its self-source, a ruthless Fate  
Warring with the flesh of man;  
Bloodshed bringing in its train  
Kindred blood that flows again,  
Anger still unreconciled  
Poisoning a house's life  
With darkness, treachery and strife,  
Wreaking vengeance for a murdered child.'

So Calchas, from that parting prodigy  
Auguring the royal house's destiny,  
Pronounced his warning of a fatal curse,  
With hope of better mingling fear of worse.  
Let us too, echoing his uncertain tale,  
*Cry Sorrow, sorrow--yet let good prevail!*

Let good prevail!  
So be it! Yet, what is good? And who  
Is God? How name him, and speak true?  
If he accept the name that men  
Give him, Zeus I name him then.  
I, still perplexed in mind,  
For long have searched and weighed  
Every hope of comfort or of aid:  
Still I can find  
No creed to lift this heaviness,  
This fear that haunts without excuse--

No name inviting faith, no wistful guess,  
Save only--Zeus.

The first of gods is gone,

Old Ouranos, once blown  
With violence and pride;  
His name shall not be known,  
Nor that his dynasty once lived, and died.  
His strong successor, Cronos, had his hour,  
Then went his way, thrice thrown  
By a yet stronger power.  
Now Zeus is lord; and he  
Who loyally acclaims his victory  
Shall by heart's instinct find the universal key:

Zeus, whose will has marked for man  
The sole way where wisdom lies;  
Ordered one eternal plan:  
*Man must suffer to be wise.*  
Head-winds heavy with past ill  
Stray his course and cloud his heart:  
Sorrow takes the blind soul's part—  
Man grows wise against his will.

For powers who rule from thrones above  
By ruthlessness commend their love.

So was it then. Agamemnon, mortified,  
Dared not, would not, admit to error; thought  
Of his great Hellene fleet, and in his pride  
Spread sail to the ill wind he should have fought.  
Meanwhile his armed men moped along the shores,  
And cursed the wind, and ate his dwindling stores;  
Stared at white Chalkis' roofs day after day  
Across the swell that churned in Aulis Bay.  
And still from Strymon came that Northern blast,

While hulks and ropes grew rotten, moorings parted,  
Deserters slunk away,  
All ground their teeth, bored, helpless, hungry, thwarted.  
The days of waiting doubled. More days passed.  
The flower of warlike Hellas withered fast.

Then Calchas spoke again. The wind, he said,  
Was sent by Artemis; and he revealed  
Her remedy--a thought to crush like lead  
The hearts of Atreus' sons, who wept, as weep they must,  
And speechless ground their scepters in the dust.  
The elder king then spoke: 'What can I say?  
Disaster follows if I disobey;  
Surely yet worse disaster if I yield  
And slaughter my own child, my home's delight,  
In her young innocence, and stain my hand  
With blasphemous unnatural cruelty,  
Bathed in the blood I fathered! Either way,  
Ruin! Disband the fleet, sail home, and earn  
The deserter's badge--abandon my command,  
Betray the alliance-- now? The wind must turn,  
There must be sacrifice, a maid must bleed--

Their chafing rage demands it--they are right!  
May good prevail, and justify my deed!'

Then he put on  
The harness of Necessity.  
The doubtful tempest of his soul  
Veered, and his prayer was turned to blasphemy,  
His offering to impiety.  
Hence that repentance late and long

Which, since his madness passed, pays toll  
For that one reckless wrong.  
Shameless self-willed infatuation  
Emboldens men to dare damnation,  
And starts the wheels of doom which roll  
Relentless to their piteous goal.

So Agamemnon, rather than retreat,  
Endured to offer up his daughter's life  
To help a war fought for a faithless wife  
And pay the ransom for a storm-bound fleet.

Heedless of her tears,  
Her cries of 'Father!' and her maiden years,  
Her judges valued more  
Their glory and their war.  
A prayer was said. Her father gave the word.  
Limp in her flowing dress  
The priest's attendants held her high  
Above the altar, as men hold a kid.  
Her father spoke again, to bid  
One bring a gag, and press  
Her sweet mouth tightly with a cord,  
Lest Atreus' house be cursed by some ill-omened cry.

Rough hands tear at her girdle, cast  
Her saffron silks to earth. Her eyes  
Search for her slaughterers; and each,  
Seeing her beauty, that surpassed  
A painter's vision, yet denies  
The pity her dumb looks beseech,  
Struggling for voice; for often in old days,

When brave men feasted in her father's hall,  
With simple skill and pious praise  
Linked to the flute's pure tone  
Her virgin voice would melt the hearts of all,  
Honoring the third libation near her father's throne.

The rest I did not see,  
Nor do I speak of it . . .

But this I know;  
What Calchas prophesies will be fulfilled.  
The scale of justice falls in equity:  
The killer will be killed.

But now, farewell foreboding! Time may show,  
But cannot alter, what shall be.  
What help, then, to bewail  
Troubles before they fall?  
Events will take their way  
Even as the prophets words foreshadowed all.  
For what is next at hand,  
Let good prevail!  
That is the prayer we pray--  
We, who alone now stand  
In Agamemnon's place, to guard this Argive land.  
The day has broken. THE QUEEN *now turns*  
*and stands facing the ELDERS.*

CHORUS: We come obedient to your bidding, Clytemnestra.  
Our king and leader absent, and his throne unfilled,  
Our duty pays his due observance to his wife.  
Have you received some message? Do these sacrifices  
Rise for good news, give thanks for long hope re-assured?

I ask in love; and will as loyally receive  
Answer or silence.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Good news, if the proverb's true,  
Should break with sunrise from the kindly womb of night.  
But here's a richer joy than you dared ever hope:  
Our Argive men have captured Priam's town.

CHORUS: Have *what*?  
I heard it wrong—I can't believe it!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Troy is ours!  
Is that clear speaking?

CHORUS: Happiness fills my eyes with tears.

CHORUS: Have you some sure proof of this?

CLYTEMNESTRA: I have indeed; unless a god has played me  
false.

CHORUS: A god! Was it some dream you had, persuaded  
you?

CLYTEMNESTRA: Dream! Am I one to air drowsy  
imaginings?

CHORUS: Surely you feed yourself on unconfirmed report?

CLYTEMNESTRA: You choose to criticize me as an ignorant  
girl!

CHORUS: Well, then, when was Troy captured?

CLYTEMNESTRA: In this very night  
That brought to birth this glorious sun.

CHORUS: What messenger  
Could fly so fast from Troy to here?

CLYTEMNESTRA: The god of fire!  
Ida first launched his blazing beam; thence to this palace  
Beacon lit beacon in relays of flame. From Ida  
To Hermes' crag on Lemnos; from that island, third  
To receive the towering torch was Athos, rock of Zeus;  
There, as the blaze leapt the dark leagues, the watch in

welcome

Leapt too, and a twin tower of brightness speared the sky,  
Pointing athwart the former course; and in a stride  
Crossing the Aegean, like the whip-lash of lightning, flew  
The resinous dazzle, molten-gold, till the fish danced,  
As at sunrise, enraptured with the beacon's glow,  
Which woke reflected sunrise on Makistos' heights.  
The watchman there, proof against sleep, surprise or sloth,  
Rose faithful to the message; and his faggots' flame  
Swept the wide distance to Euripus' channel, where  
Its burning word was blazoned to the Messapian guards.  
They blazed in turn, kindling their pile of withered heath,  
And passed the signal on. The strong beam, still undimmed,  
Crossed at one bound Asopus' plain, and like the moon  
In brilliance, lighted on Cithaeron's crags, and woke  
Another watch, to speed the flying token on.  
On still the hot gleam hurtled, past Gorgopis' lake;  
Made Aegiplanctus, stirred those watching mountaineers  
Not to stint boughs and brushwood; generously they fed  
Their beacon, and up burst a monstrous beard of fire,  
Leapt the proud headland fronting the Saronic Gulf,

To lofty Arachnaeus, neighbor to our streets;  
Thence on this Atreid palace the triumphant fire  
Flashed, lineal descendant of the flame of Ida.

Such, Elders, was the ritual race my torchbearers,  
Each at his faithful post succeeding each, fulfilled;  
And first and last to run share equal victory.

Such, Elders, is my proof and token offered you,  
A message sent to me from Troy by Agamemnon.

CHORUS: Madam, we will in due course offer thanks to  
Heaven;

But now we want to savor wonder to the full,  
And hear you speak at length: tell us your news again!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Today the Greeks hold Troy! Her walls  
echo with cries

That will not blend. Pour oil and vinegar in one vessel,  
You'll see them part and swirl, and never mix: so, there,  
I think, down narrow streets a discord grates the ear--  
Screams of the captured, shouts of those who've captured  
them,

The unhappy and the happy. Women of Troy prostrate  
Over dead husbands, brothers; aged grandfathers  
Mourning dead sons and grandsons, and remembering  
Their very cries are slaves' cries now. . . . And then the  
victors:

After a night of fighting, roaming, plundering,  
Hungry to breakfast, while their hosts lie quiet in dust;  
No rules to keep, no order of place; each with the luck  
That fell to him, quartered in captured homes of Troy,  
Tonight, at last, rolled in dry blankets, safe from frost--  
No going on guard--blissfully they'll sleep from dusk to dawn.

If in that captured town they are reverencing the gods  
Whose home it was, and not profaning holy places,  
The victors will avoid being vanquished in their turn.  
Only, let no lust of unlawful plunder tempt  
Our soldiers' hearts with wealth, to their own harm--there still  
Remains the journey home: God grant we see them safe!  
If the fleet sails free from the taint of sin, the gods  
May grant them safety to retrace their outward course--  
Those whom no wakeful anger of the forgotten dead  
Waits to surprise with vengeance. . . .

These are a woman's words.

May good prevail beyond dispute, in sight of all!

My life holds many blessings; I would enjoy them now.

CHORUS: Madam, your words are like a man's, both wise and  
kind.

Now we have heard trustworthy proof from your own lips,  
We will prepare ourselves again to praise the gods,  
Whose gracious acts call for our most devout response.

CLYTEMNESTRA *goes into the palace.*

CHORUS: Zeus, supreme of heavenly powers!  
Friendly night, whose fateful hours  
Built for Argos' warlike name  
Bright imperishable fame!  
Night in which a net was laid  
Fast about the Trojan towers  
Such that none of mortal flesh,  
Great or little, could evade  
Grim annihilation's deadly mesh!  
This is the hand of Zeus! Zeus we revere,



Whose lasting law both host and guest must fear;  
Who long since against Paris bent  
His bow with careful aim, and sent  
His vengeance flying not too near  
Nor past the stars, but timed to pay  
The debt of Justice on the appointed day.

‘The hand of Zeus has cast  
The proud from their high place!’  
This we may say, and trace  
That hand from first to last.  
As Zeus foreknowing willed,  
So was their end fulfilled.

One said, ‘The gods disdain  
To mark man’s wanton way  
Who tramples in the dust  
Beauty of holy things.’  
Impious! The truth shows plain:  
Pride now has paid its debt, and they  
Who laughed at Right and put their boastful trust  
In arms and swollen wealth of kings,  
Have gone their destined way.  
A middle course is best,  
Not poor nor proud; but this,  
By no clear rule defined,  
Eludes the unstable, undiscerning mind,  
Whose aim will surely miss.  
Thenceforth there is no way to turn aside;  
When man has once transgressed,  
And in his wealth and pride  
Spurned the high shrine of justice, nevermore

May his sin hope to hide  
In that safe dimness he enjoyed before.

Retreat cut off, the fiend Temptation  
Forces him onward, the unseen  
Effectual agent of Damnation;  
When his fair freshness once has been  
Blotched and defiled with grime, and he,  
Like worthless bronze, which testing blows  
Have blackened, lies despoiled, and shows  
His baseness plain for all to see,  
Then every cure renews despair;  
A boy chasing a bird on wing,  
He on his race and soil must bring  
A deeper doom than flesh can bear;  
The gods are deaf to every prayer;  
If pity lights a human eye,  
Pity by Justice’ law must share  
The sinner’s guilt, and with the sinner die.  
So, doomed, deluded, Paris came  
To sit at his host’s table, and seduce  
Helen his wife, and shame  
The house of Atreus and the law of Zeus.

Bequeathing us in Argos  
Muster of shields and spears,  
The din of forge and dockyard,  
Lightly she crossed the threshold  
And left her palace, fearless  
Of what should wake her fears;  
And took to Troy as dowry  
Destruction, blood, and tears.

Here, in her home deserted,  
The voice of guard and groom  
With love and grief lamented:  
'O house! O king! O pity!  
O pillow softly printed  
Where her loved head had rested!'  
There lies her husband fasting,  
Dumb in his stricken room.  
His thought across sea reaches  
With longings, not reproaches;  
A ghost will rule the palace,  
A home become a tomb!  
Her statue's sweet perfection  
Torments his desolation;  
Still his eyes' hunger searches--  
That living grace is hardened  
And lost that beauty's bloom.

Visions of her beset him  
With false and fleeting pleasure  
When dreams and dark are deep.  
He sees her, runs to hold her;  
And, through his fingers slipping,  
Lightly departs his treasure,  
The dream he cannot keep,  
Wafted on wings that follow  
The shadowy paths of sleep.

Such are the searching sorrows  
This royal palace knows,  
While through the streets of Argos

Grief yet more grievous grows,  
With all our manhood gathered  
So far from earth of Hellas;  
As in each home unfathered,  
Each widowed bed, the whetted  
Sword of despair assails  
Hearts where all hope has withered  
And angry hate prevails.  
They sent forth men to battle,  
But no such men return;  
And home, to claim their welcome,  
Come ashes in an urn.

For War's a banker, flesh his gold.  
There by the furnace of Troy's field,  
Where thrust meets thrust, he sits to hold  
His scale, and watch the spear-point sway;  
And back to waiting homes he sends  
Slag from the ore, a little dust  
To drain hot tears from hearts of friends;  
Good measure, safely stored and sealed  
In a convenient jar--the just  
Price for the man they sent away.  
They praise him through their tears, and say,  
'He was a soldier!' or, 'He died  
Nobly, with death on every side!'  
And fierce resentment mutters low,  
'Yes--for another's wife!' And so  
From grief springs gall, which fear must hide--  
Let kings and their revenges go!  
But under Ilion's wall the dead,  
Heirs of her earth, lie chambered deep;

While she, whose living blood they shed,  
Covers her conquerors in sleep.

A nation's voice, enforced with anger,  
Strikes deadly as a public curse.  
I wait for word of hidden danger,  
And fear lest bad give place to worse.  
God marks that man with watchful eyes  
Who counts his killed by companies;  
And when his luck, his proud success,  
Forgets the law of righteousness,  
Then the dark Furies launch at length  
A counter-blow to crush his strength  
And cloud his brightness, till the dim  
Pit of oblivion swallows him.  
In fame unmeasured, praise too high,  
Lies danger: God's sharp lightnings fly  
To stagger mountains. Then, I choose  
Wealth that invites no rankling hate;  
Neither to lay towns desolate,  
Nor wear the chains of those who lose  
Freedom and life to war and Fate.

*The sound of women's voices excitedly shouting and cheering is heard. One or two ELDERS go out, and return immediately to report. The following remarks are made severally by members of the CHORUS.*

Since the beacon's news was heard  
Rumor flies through every street.  
Ought we to believe a word?  
Is it some inspired deceit?  
Childish, crack-brained fantasy!

Wing your hopes with such a tale,  
Soon you'll find that fire can lie,  
Facts can change, and trust can fail.  
Women all are hasty-headed:  
Beacons blaze--belief rejoices;  
All too easily persuaded.  
Rumor fired by women's voices,  
As we know, is quickly spread;  
As we know, is quickly dead!

*The CHORUS depart; and an interval representing the lapse of several days now takes place. After the interval the CHORUS reappear in great excitement.*

CHORUS: We shall soon know whether this relay-race of  
flame,  
This midnight torch-parade, this beacon-telegraph,  
Told us the truth, or if the fire made fools of us -  
All a delightful dream! Look! There's a herald coming  
Up from the shore, wearing a crown of olive-leaves!  
And, further off, a marching column of armed men,

Sheathed in hot dust, tells me this herald won't stand dumb  
Or light a pinewood fire to announce the smoke of Troy!  
Either his news doubles our happiness, or else--  
The gods forbid all else! Good shows at first appearance,  
Now may the proof be good! He who prays otherwise  
For Argos--let him reap the folly of his soul!

*Enter a HERALD.*

HERALD: Argos! Dear earth my fathers trod! After ten years  
Today I have come home! All other hopes were false,  
But this proves true! I dared not think my own land would  
In death receive me to my due and dearest rest.  
Now blest be Argos, and the sun's sweet light, and Zeus,  
God of this realm, and Pythian Apollo, who no more  
Aims against us the shafts of his immortal bow.  
You fought us, Phoebus, by Scamander long enough:  
Be Savior now, be Healer; once, not twice, our death!  
Gods of the city's gathering, hear my prayer; and thou,  
Hermes, dear Guardian, Herald, every herald's god;  
And you, heroes of old, whose blessing sent us forth,  
Bless the returning remnant that the sword has spared!  
O house of kings! Beloved walls! O August thrones!  
You deities who watch the rising sun, watch now!  
Welcome with shining eyes the royal architect  
Of towering glories to adorn his ancient throne.  
To you, and every Argive citizen, Agamemnon  
Brings light in darkness; come, then, greet him royally,  
As fits one in whose hands Zeus the Avenger's plough  
Passed over Troy, to split her towers, scar and subdue  
Her fields, and from her fair soil extirpate her seed.

So harsh a halter Atreus' elder son has thrown  
Around Troy's neck, and now comes home victorious  
To claim supremest honors among mortal men.  
For neither Paris now, nor his accomplice town,  
Can boast their deed was greater than their punishment.  
Found guilty of theft and robbery, he has forfeited  
His treasured spoil, destroyed his father's house and throne,  
And made his people pay twice over for his sin.

CHORUS: Herald of the Greek army, greeting! Welcome  
home!

HERALD: Thanks. For ten years I've prayed for life; now I  
can die.

CHORUS: Longing for Argos, for your home, tormented you?

HERALD: Cruelly; and now my cloak is wet with tears of joy.

CHORUS: Your suffering had its happy side.

HERALD: What do you mean?

CHORUS: Your love and longing were returned. Is that not  
happy?

HERALD: You mean that Argos longed for us, as we for her?

CHORUS: Our hearts were dark with trouble. We missed and  
needed you.

HERALD: What caused your trouble? An enemy?

CHORUS: I learnt long ago,  
*Least said is soonest mended.*

HERALD: But was Argos threatened  
In the king's absence?

CHORUS: Friend, you said just now that death  
Was dearly welcome. Our hearts echo what you felt.

HERALD: Yes, I could die, now the war's over, and all well.  
Time blurs the memory; some things one recalls as good,  
Others as hateful. We're not gods; then why expect

To enjoy a lifetime of unbroken happiness?  
To think what we went through! If I described it all,  
The holes we camped in, dirt and weariness and sweat;  
Or out at sea, with storms all night, trying to sleep  
On a narrow board, with half a blanket; and all day,  
Miserable and sick, we suffered and put up with it.  
Then, when we landed, things were worse. We had to camp  
Close by the enemy's wall, in the wet river-meadows,  
Soaked with the dew and mist, ill from damp clothes, our hair  
Matted like savages'. If I described the winter, when  
In cruel snow-winds from Ida birds froze on the trees;  
Or if I told of the fierce heat, when Ocean dropped  
Waveless and windless to his noon-day bed, and slept . . .

Well, it's no time for moaning; all that's over now.  
And those who died out there--it's over for them too;  
No need to jump to orders; they can take their rest.  
Why call the roll of those who were expendable,  
And make the living wince from old wounds probed again?  
Nor much hurraing either, if we're sensible.  
For us who've come safe home the good weighs heaviest,  
And what we've suffered counts for less. The praise that's due,  
Proudly inscribed, will show these words to the bright sun :  
The Argive army conquered Troy,  
And brought home over land and sea  
These hard-won spoils, the pride and joy  
Of ancient palaces, to be  
Trophies of victory, and grace  
The temples of the Hellene race.  
Let Argos hear this, and receive her general home  
With thanks and praise. Let Zeus, who gave us victory,  
Be blest for his great mercy. I have no more to say.

CHORUS: Well, I was wrong, I own it. Old and ready to learn  
Is always young. But this great news is for the palace,  
And chiefly Clytemnestra, whose wealth of joy we share.

*CLYTEMNESTRA has appeared at the palace door.*

CLYTEMNESTRA: I sang for joy to hail this victory long ago,  
When the first fiery midnight message told that Troy  
Was sacked and shattered. Someone then took me to task:  
'Beacons! So you believe them? Troy, you think, is taken?  
Typical female hopefulness!' Remarks like these  
Exposed my folly. Yet I made thankful sacrifice,  
And throughout Argos women gathered to celebrate  
Victory with songs of praise in temples of all the gods,  
And feed their scented fires with rich flesh-offerings.  
I have no need to hear your detailed narrative;  
I'll hear all from the king's own lips. But first, to greet  
Fitly and soon my honored husband's home-coming--  
For to a wife what day is sweeter than when she,  
Receiving by God's mercy her lord safe home from war,  
Flings wide the gates in welcome?-- take to him this message:  
Let him come quickly; Argos longs for him; and he  
Will find at home a wife as faithful as he left,  
A watch-dog at his door; knowing one loyalty;  
To enemies implacable; in all ways unchanged.  
No seal of his have I unsealed in these ten years.

Of pleasure found with other men, or any breath  
Of scandal, I know no more than how to dip hot steel.

*Exit CLYTEMNESTRA to the palace.*

HERALD: That's a strange boast--and more strange, as more full of truth.

Is it not scandal that a queen should speak such words?

CHORUS: Strange? No! Her style eludes you. We interpret her.

A very proper statement--unimpeachable!

Now, Herald, tell us of our loved King Menelaus:

Has he come? Did he sail with you? Is he safely home?

HERALD: That false good news you ask for--I can't give it you, My friends; delusion would not comfort you for long.

CHORUS: Telling a fair tale falsely cannot hide the truth;

When truth and good news part, the rift shows plain enough.

HERALD: Then here it is: Menelaus has vanished, ship and all!

CHORUS: You mean, he sailed with you from Troy, and then a storm

Fell on the fleet, and parted his ship from the rest?

HERALD: Good marksman! An age of agony pointed in three words.

CHORUS: But Menelaus--what was it thought had happened to him?

Is he given up for lost? Or may he yet survive?

HERALD: No one can tell, for no one knows; except, perhaps, The Sun, who fosters every earthly creature's life.

CHORUS: You mean, I think, that when this storm had scourged our fleet

Some anger of the heavenly powers was satisfied?

HERALD: Can it be right to foul this fair and holy day, Blurting bad news? After our thanksgiving to the gods, Such speech is out of place. When a man stands recounting With bloodshot stare catastrophe and horror, an army dead, The body of State staggered and gored, homes emptied, Men blasted, lashed out of life by fire and sword, War's whips-

-

If such tales were my wares, this triumph-song of disaster I bring, would suit well. But my news is victory, Brought to a jubilant city--how can I countervail Such good with sorrow, tell of the murderous armed alliance Fate forged with angry gods to pursue and harass us? For fire and water, age-old enemies, made league, And pledged good faith in combined slaughter of Greek men. One night a vicious swell rose with a gale from Thrace; The sky was a mad shepherd tearing his own flock; Ship against ship butted like rutting rams; mountains Of wind and water leapt, surge swallowed and rain threshed. At dawn, where were the ships? The bright sun beamed--we saw The Aegean flowering thick with faces of dead Greeks And scraps of wrecks . . .

Our hull had held, and we came through.

It was no mortal hand that gripped our helm that night: Some god, by guile or intercession, saved our lives. Fortune sat smiling on our prow; we sprang no leak, Nor ran aground on rocks. In the next morning's light, Stunned, sickened, still incredulous of our own luck, We brooded, thinking of our maimed and battered fleet. And they, if any still draw breath, now speak of us As caught in the same fate we picture theirs. . . . But yet, May best prove truest! For Menelaus, more than all else Expect him home. If any searching shaft of sun Sees him alive and well, by the providence of Zeus Not yet resolved to exterminate this house--there's hope

That Menelaus will yet come safe to his own home.

And every word you have heard me speak is the plain truth.

*The MESSENGER goes in the direction from which he came.*

CHORUS: Who was the unknown seer whose voice--  
Uttered at venture, but instinct  
With prescience of what Fate decreed  
Guessing infallibly, made choice  
Of a child's name, and deftly linked  
Symbol with truth, and name with deed,  
Naming, inspired, the glittering bride  
Of spears, for whom men killed and died,  
Helen, the Spoiler? On whose lips  
Was born that fit and fatal name,  
To glut the sea with spoil of ships,  
Spoil souls with swords, a town with flame?  
The curtained softness of her bed  
She left, to hear the Zephyr breathe  
Gigantic in tall sails; and soon  
Comes hue and cry--armed thousands fly  
Tracing her trackless oar, and sheathe  
Their keels in Simois' shingly bank,  
Near fields where grass today grows rank  
In soil by war's rich rain made red.

And anger--roused, relentless, sure--  
Taught Troy that words have double edge,  
That men and gods use *bond* and *pledge*  
For love past limit, doom past cure:  
Love seals the hearts of bride and groom;  
And seal of love is seal of doom.  
Loud rings the holy marriage-song

As kinsmen honor prince and bride;  
The hour is theirs--but not for long.  
Wrath, borne on Time's unhurrying tide,  
Claims payment due for double wrong--  
The outraged hearth, the god defied.  
And songs are drowned in tears, and soon  
Must Troy the old learn a new tune;  
On Paris, once her praise and pride,  
She calls reproach, that his proud wooing  
Has won his own and her undoing:  
Her sons beset on every side,  
Her life-blood mercilessly spilt--  
Hers is the loss, and his the guilt.

There was a shepherd once who reared at home  
A lion's cub. It shared with sucking lambs  
Their milk--gentle, while bone and blood were young.  
The children loved it; the old watched and smiled.  
Often the shepherd held it like a child  
High in his arms; and often it would seek  
His hand with soft eyes and caressing tongue,  
Tense with the force of hunger. But in time  
It showed the nature of its kind. Repaying  
Its debt for food and shelter, it prepared  
A feast unbidden. Soon the nauseous reek  
Of torn flesh filled the house; a bloody slime  
Drenched all the ground from that unholy slaying,  
While helpless weeping servants stood and stared.

The whelp once reared with lambs, now grown a beast,  
Fulfills his nature as Destruction's priest!

And so to Troy there came  
One in whose presence shone  
Beauty no thought can name:  
A still enchantment of sweet summer calm;  
A rarity for wealth to dote upon;  
Glances whose gentle fire  
Bestowed both wound and balm;  
A flower to melt man's heart with wonder and desire.  
But time grew ripe, and love's fulfillment ran  
Aside from that sweet course where it began.  
She, once their summer joy,  
Transmuted, now like a swift curse descended  
On every home, on every life  
Whose welcome once befriended  
The outlaw wife;  
A fiend sent by the god of host and guest,  
Whose law her lover had transgressed,  
To break his heart, and break the pride of Troy.

When Earth and Time were young,  
A simple ancient saw  
Phrased on the common tongue  
Declared that man's good fortune, once mature,  
Does not die childless, but begets its heir;  
That from life's goodness grows, by Nature's law,  
Calamity past cure  
And ultimate despair.  
I think alone; my mind  
Rejects this general belief.  
Sin, not prosperity, engenders grief;  
For impious acts breed their own kind,  
And evil's nature is to multiply.

The house whose ways are just in word and deed  
Still as the years go by  
Sees lasting wealth and noble sons succeed.  
So, by law of consequence,  
Pride or Sin the Elder will,  
In the man who chooses ill,  
Breed a Younger Insolence.  
Sin the Younger breeds again  
Yet another unseen Power  
Like the Powers that gave it birth:  
Recklessness, whose force defies  
War and violence, heaven and earth;  
Whose menace like a black cloud lies  
On the doomed house hour by hour,  
Fatal with fear, remorse, and pain.

But Justice with her shining eyes  
Lights the smoke-begrimed and mean  
Dwelling; honors those who prize  
Honor; searches far to find  
All whose hearts and hands are clean;  
Passes with averted gaze  
Golden palaces which hide  
Evil armed in insolence;  
Power and riches close combined,  
Falsely stamped with all men's praise,  
Win from her no reverence.  
Good and evil she will guide  
To their sure end by their appointed ways.

*Enter AGAMEMNON in his chariot, followed by another  
chariot bearing spoils of war and CASSANDRA.*



CHORUS: King! Heir of Atreus! Conqueror of Troy!  
 What greeting shall we bring? What shall we say  
 To voice our hearts' devotion,  
 Observe both truth and measure,  
 Be neither scant nor fulsome in our love?  
 Many, whose conscience is not innocent,  
 Attach high value to a show of praise.  
 As ill-luck finds on all sides  
 Eyes brimming with condolence  
 Where no true sting of sorrow pricks the heart,  
 So now some harsh embittered faces, forced  
 Into a seemly smile, will welcome you,  
 And hide the hearts of traitors  
 Beneath their feigned rejoicing.  
 Well, a wise shepherd knows his flock by face;  
 And a wise king can tell the flatterer's eye--  
 Moist, unctuous, adoring--  
 The expressive sign of loyalty not felt.  
 Now this I will not hide: ten years ago  
 When you led Greece to war for Helen's sake  
 You were set down as sailing  
 Far off the course of wisdom.  
 We thought you wrong, misguided, when you tried  
 To keep morale from sagging  
 In superstitious soldiers  
 By offering sacrifice to stop the storm.  
 Those times are past; you have come victorious home;  
 Now from our open hearts we wish you well.  
 Time and your own enquiries  
 Will show, among your people,  
 Who has been loyal, who has played you false.  
 AGAMEMNON: First, Argos, and her native gods, receive

from me  
 The conqueror's greeting on my safe return; for which,  
 As for the just revenge I wrought on Priam's Troy,  
 Heaven shares my glory. Supplications without end  
 Won Heaven's ear; Troy stood her trial; unfaltering  
 The immortals cast their votes into the urn of death,  
 Dooming Troy's walls to dust, her men to the sword's edge.  
 The acquitting urn saw hope alone come near, and pass,  
 Vanishing in each empty hand. Smoke, rising still,  
 Marks great Troy's fall; flames of destruction's sacrifice  
 Live yet; and, as they die, stir from the settled ash  
 The wind-borne incense of dead wealth and luxury.  
 Now for this victory let our pious thanksgiving  
 Tell and re-tell Heaven's favor. We have made Troy pay  
 For her proud rape a woman's price. The Argive beast,  
 The lion rampant on all our shields, at dead of night  
 Sprang from the womb of the horse to grind that city's bones,  
 A ranked and ravening litter, that over wall and tower  
 Leaping, licked royal blood till lust was surfeited.

Thus to the gods I pay first my full salutation.  
 For your advice, I note it; I am of your mind,  
 And uphold your judgment. There are few whose inborn love  
 Warms without envy to a friend's prosperity.  
 Poison of jealousy laps the disappointed heart,  
 Doubling its grievance: pangs for its own losses match  
 With pangs for neighbors' wealth. Life and long observation  
 Taught me the look of men whose loving show, examined,  
 Proves but a shadow's shadow: I speak of what I know.  
 One man, Odysseus, who set sail unwillingly -  
 At this hour dead or living?--he alone, once yoked,  
 With good will shared my burden.

For affairs of State,  
And this feared disaffection, we will set a day  
For assembly and debate among our citizens,  
And take wise counsel; where disease wants remedy,  
Fire or the knife shall purge this body for its good.  
Now to my home, to stand at my own altar-hearth  
And give Heaven my first greeting, whose protecting power  
Sent forth, and brought me home again. May Victory,  
My guardian hitherto, walk constant at my side!

*Enter CLYTEMNESTRA attended by MAIDS  
holding a long drape of crimson silk.*

CLYTEMNESTRA: Elders and citizens of Argos!  
In your presence now  
I will speak, unashamed, a wife's love for her husband.  
With time dies diffidence. What I shall tell I learnt  
Untaught, from my own long endurance, these ten years  
My husband spent under the walls of Ilion.  
First, that a woman should sit forlorn at home, unmanned,  
Is a crying grief. Then, travelers, one on other's heels,  
Dismayed the palace, each with worse news than the last.  
Why, if my lord received as many wounds as Rumor,  
Plying from Troy to Argos, gave him, he is a net,  
All holes! Or had he died each time report repeated  
News of his death--see him, a second Geryon,  
Boasting his monstrous right, his thrice-spread quilt of earth---  
A grave for each death, each body! Many times despair  
At a cruel message noosed my throat in a hung cord,  
Which force against my will untied.

These fears explain

Why our child is not here to give you fitting welcome,  
Our true love's pledge, Orestes. Have no uneasiness.  
He is in Phocis, a guest of Strophius your well-tried friend,  
Who warned me of peril from two sources: first, the risk  
Threatening your life at Troy; then, if conspiracy  
Matured to popular revolt in Argos, fear  
Of man's instinct to trample on his fallen lord.  
Such was his reasoning--surely free from all suspicion.

For me--the springing torrents of my tears are all  
Drawn dry, no drop left; and my sleepless eyes are sore  
With weeping by the lamp long lit for you in vain.  
In dreams, the tenuous tremors of the droning gnat  
Roused me from dreadful visions of more deaths for you  
Than could be compassed in the hour that slept with me.

There is no dearer sight than shelter after storm;  
No escape sweeter than from siege of circumstance.  
Now, after siege and storm endured, my happy heart  
Welcomes my husband, faithful watch-dog of his home,  
Our ship's firm anchor, towering pillar that upholds  
This royal roof; as dear, as to a father's hope  
His longed-for son, a spring to thirsty travelers,  
Or sight of land unlooked-for to men long at sea.

Such praise I hold his due; and may Heaven's jealousy  
Acquit us; our past suffering has been enough.

Now, dearest husband, come, step from your chariot.  
But do not set to earth, my lord, the conquering foot  
That trod down Troy. Servants, do as you have been bidden;  
Make haste, carpet his way with crimson tapestries,

Spread silk before your master's feet; Justice herself  
Shall lead him to a home he never hoped to see.  
All other matters forethought, never lulled by sleep,  
Shall order justly as the will of Heaven decrees.

*Clytemnestra's MAIDS spread a path of crimson  
cloth from the chariot to the palace door.*

AGAMEMNON: Daughter of Leda, guardian of my house, your  
speech

Matches its theme, my absence; for both were prolonged.  
Praise fitly spoken should be heard on other lips.  
And do not with these soft attentions woman me,  
Nor prostrate like a fawning Persian mouth at me  
Your loud addresses; nor with your spread cloths invite  
Envy of gods, for honors due to gods alone.  
I count it dangerous, being mortal, to set foot  
On rich embroidered silks. I would be revered  
As man, not god. The praise of fame rings clear without  
These frills and fancy foot-rugs; and the god's best gift  
Is a mind free from folly. Call him fortunate  
Whom the end of life finds harbored in tranquility.

CLYTEMNESTRA: There is the sea--who shall exhaust the sea?  
--which teems

With purple dye costly as silver, a dark stream  
For staining of fine stuffs, unceasingly renewed.  
This house has store of crimson, by Heaven's grace, enough  
For one outpouring; you are no king of beggary!  
Had oracles prescribed it, I would have dedicated  
Twenty such cloths to trampling, if by care and cost  
I might ensure safe journey's end for this one life.  
Now you are come to your dear home, your altar-hearth,

The tree, its root refreshed, spreads leaf to the high beams  
To veil us from the dog-star's heat. Your loved return  
Shines now like Spring warmth after winter; but when Zeus  
From the unripe grape presses his wine, then through the  
house  
Heat dies, and coolness comes, as through this royal door  
Enters its lord, perfected to receive his own.

AGAMEMNON: I have said how I would enter with an easy  
mind.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Tell me--not contrary to your resolve--one  
thing.

AGAMEMNON: Be sure I shall do nothing against my resolve.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Might you have vowed to the gods, in  
danger, such an act?

AGAMEMNON: Yes, if someone with knowledge had  
prescribed it me.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Imagine Priam conqueror: what would he  
have done?

AGAMEMNON: Walked on embroidered satin, I have little  
doubt

CLYTEMNESTRA: Then why humble your heart to men's  
censorious tongue?

AGAMEMNON: Why indeed? Yet the people's voice speaks  
with great power.

Greatness wins hate. Unenvied is unenviable.

AGAMEMNON: It does not suit a woman to be combative.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Yet it suits greatness also to accept defeat.

AGAMEMNON: Why, here's a battle! What would you not give  
to win?

CLYTEMNESTRA: Yield! You are victor: give me too my  
victory.

AGAMEMNON: Since you're resolved--*(to an attendant)*

Come, kneel; untie my shoes; dismiss  
These leathern slaves that smooth my path. And as I tread  
This deep-sea treasure, may no watchful envious god  
Glance from afar. It offends modesty, that I  
Should dare with unwashed feet to soil these costly rugs,  
Worth weight for weight of silver, spoiling my own house!  
But let that pass.

Take in this girl and treat her well.  
God will reward from heaven a gentle conqueror.  
Slavery is a yoke no one bears willingly; and she  
Came to me by the army's gift, of all Troy's wealth  
The chosen jewel.

Now, since I have been subdued to obedience in this matter,  
Treading on purple I will go into my house.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Eleleleleu! *(a prolonged triumphant cry; which the CHORUS accept as a formal celebration of the victor's return, while only CASSANDRA understands its true meaning.)*

*AGAMEMNON walks alone along the purple path and enters the palace.*

CLYTEMNESTRA: Zeus, Zeus, Fulfiller! Now fulfill these  
prayers of mine;  
And let thy care accomplish all that is thy will!

*CLYTEMNESTRA enters the palace. AGAMEMNON'S chariot is taken away by attendants. CASSANDRA remains seated in the second chariot.*

CHORUS: What is this persistent dread  
Haunting, hovering to show  
Signs to my foreboding soul,  
While unbidden and unpaid  
Throbs the prophet in my veins,  
While persuasive confidence  
That should rule the heart, and scorn  
Fantasies of cloudy dreams,  
Trembles, and resigns her throne?  
Once before, though far away,  
My heart knew the pregnant hour,  
When at Troy our sailors' shouts,  
As they coiled their sheets astern,  
Chimed with my triumphal song;  
And the fleet set sail for home.

Then was guessing; now I see  
With these eyes the fleet returned.  
Yet my spirit knows again  
The foreboding hour; again  
Sings, by untaught instinct, that  
Sad, familiar, fatal dirge;  
Yields her kingdom in the flesh,  
Daunted with surmise, and feels  
Pang and puke of groin and gut,  
Blood in riot, brain awl,  
Nerve and tissue taut, and knows  
Truth must prick, where flesh is sore.  
Yet I pray, may time and truth  
Shame my fears; may prophecy  
Vanish, and fulfillment fail!

When fortune flowers too lushly,  
Decay, her envious neighbor,  
Stands eager to invade;  
Glory's brief hours are numbered,  
And what has flowered must fade.  
Bold in success, ambition  
Sails on, where rocks lie hidden,  
Strikes, and her debt is paid.  
Yet, debts may be compounded:  
When Thracian storm-winds threaten,  
The merchant, for his silver,  
With pious prayers devotes  
A tithe in ample measure;  
Into the sea he slings it,  
And safe his vessel floats.  
The house that offers to the envious Powers  
Its wealthy surplus will not fail and die;  
Zeus to their prayers will bounteously reply,  
Bless each year's furrowed fields with sun and showers,  
Bid harvests teem, and fear of famine fly.

But when, from flesh born mortal,  
Man's blood on earth lies fallen,  
A dark, unfading stain,  
Who then by incantations  
Can bid blood live again?  
Zeus in pure wisdom ended  
That sage's skill who summoned  
Dead flesh to rise from darkness  
And live a second time;  
Lest murder cheaply mended

Invite men's hands to crime.  
Were I not sure that always  
Events and causes hold  
Sequence divinely ordered,  
And next by last controlled,  
Speech would forestall reluctance,  
Voice thoughts I dare not fathom,  
And leave no fear untold.  
But now my tongue mutters in darkness, sharing  
The heart's distress, tormented with desire  
To achieve some timely word, and still despairing;  
While my dumb spirit smoulders with deep fire.

CLYTEMNESTRA *comes to the palace door.*

CLYTEMNESTRA: You too, Cassandra there, do you hear met?

Get indoors.

You may thank Zeus, this palace bears you no ill-will;

You shall stand near our sovereign altar, and partake,

With many other slaves, the cleansing ritual.

Then leave that chariot; do not be proud.

They say Heracles once was sold, and learnt to eat slaves' bread.

If such misfortune falls, and there's no help for it--

A house of long-established wealth is generous;

Where meager hopes reap opulence, it goes hard with slaves.

Here you shall have your due--what's customary, and more.

CHORUS: It was to you she spoke. She waits. Was it not clear?

Since you're a captive in the toils of destiny

Obey, if you understand. Or do you choose defiance?

CLYTEMNESTRA: If she's not crazed, she will obey;

unless she speaks

Some weird unheard-of tongue, like swallows twittering.

CHORUS: Come, now; her bidding is the best that's possible.

Leave sitting in that chariot; obey, go in.

CLYTEMNESTRA: I have no time to spend standing

out here. Already

Victims for sacrifice wait at the central hearth.

If you understand what I have said, come in at once;

If not, (*to an attendant*) since she's a foreigner, explain by signs.

*An attendant makes signs to CASSANDRA to enter the palace.*

CHORUS: It's clear enough the girl needs an interpreter.

She has the look of some wild creature newly trapped.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Why, she is mad, hears only her own frenzied thoughts.

Has she not left her city leveled with the ground?--

Yet has not sense enough to accept her owner's bit

Till she has frothed her rage out from a bloody mouth.

I will spend words no longer, to be thus ignored.

CLYTEMNESTRA *goes into the palace.*

CHORUS: I feel pity, not anger. Come, poor girl, step down;

Yield to this hard necessity; wear your new yoke.

CASSANDRA *steps down. She sees the statue of Apollo.*

CASSANDRA: O Apollo! Oh, oh! No, no, no, no! O Earth!

O Apollo!

CHORUS :Why name Apollo with this wail of agony?

He is no god of mourning, to be so invoked.

CASSANDRA : Oh, oh! O horror! O Earth! O Apollo, Apollo!

CHORUS: Again she utters blasphemy, to call Apollo,

Whose godhead may not stand in the same house with grief.

CASSANDRA: Apollo, Apollo! Leader of journeys, my destroyer!

All this way you have led me, to destroy me again!

CHORUS: She is inspired to speak of her own sufferings.

The prophetic power stays with her even in slavery.

CASSANDRA: Apollo, Apollo! Leader of journeys, my destroyer!

Where have you led me? Oh! what fearful house is this?

CHORUS: Does not prophecy tell you this is Atreus' palace?

I tell you, then; so call it, and you will speak the truth.

CASSANDRA: No! but a house that hates

The gods; whose very stones

Bear guilty witness to a bloody act;

That hides within these gates

Remnants of bodies hacked,

And murdered children's bones!

CHORUS: This prophetess goes to it like a keen-scented hound;

We know the trail she follows, and it leads to blood.

CASSANDRA: To blood --I know. See there,

The witness that they bear--

Those children weeping for their own blood shed,

For their own tender flesh,

That cruel, nameless dish

From which their father fed!

CHORUS: We had all heard of your prophetic power; but this

Requires no prophecy to tell us of--

CASSANDRA: Ah, ah!

Oh, shame! Conspiracy!

A heart obsessed with hate

And lurking to betray

Pollutes this house anew

With deadly injury

Where deepest love was due!

Surprised, unarmed, how can he fight with Fate?

And help is far away.

CHORUS: The first we understand--all Argos speaks of it;

But to this second prophecy I have no key.

CASSANDRA: Shame on her! She will stand--

Would there were room for doubt!--

To cleanse her lawful lord

From guilt of war--and then--

How can I speak the word?

This cleansing ritual

Shall serve his burial!

Despairing hands reach out,

Snared by a stronger hand!

CHORUS: Still I am baffled by her riddling utterance;

What can one make of prophecy so recondite?

CASSANDRA: There, there! O terror! What is this new sight?

A hunting-net, Death's weapon of attack!

And she who hunts is she who shared his bed.

Howl, Furies, howl, you bloody ravening pack,

Gorged with this house's blood, yet thirsting still;

The victim bleeds: come, Fiends, and drink your fill!

CHORUS: What fiends are these you call to bay at Death?

Your ghastly hymn has paled your cheek; and pale

The blood shrinks to your heart, as when men die

Sword-struck in battle, pulse and vision fail,

And life's warm colors fly;

See, how her utterance chokes her labored breath!

CASSANDRA: Help! Look, a nightmare! What? will cow gore  
bull,

The black-horned monarch? Save him, drag him away!

The treacherous water's poured, the lustral bath is full;

She holds him in a trap made like a gown -

She strikes! He crashes down!

Listen! It is treachery, treachery, I say!

CHORUS: Although I claim no special skill in oracles,

Her words, I feel, augur no good. Yet, after all,

What good news ever comes to men through oracles?

Prophets find bad news useful. Why, the primary aim

Of all their wordy wisdom is to make men gape.

CASSANDRA: O fear, and fear again!

O pity! Not alone

He suffers; with his pain

Mingled I mourn my own!

Cruel Apollo! Why,

Why have you led me here?

Only that I may share

The death that he must die!

CHORUS: She is insane, poor girl, or god-possessed,

And for herself alone she makes this wail,

Unwearied in her tuneless song;

As the shrill nightingale

Unburdens her distracted breast,

Sobbing *Itun, Itun*, remembering all her wrong.

CASSANDRA: Bitter was her ordeal;

Yet by the kind gods' wish

The lovely robe she wears

Is feathered wings; and even

The plaint she pours to heaven,

Note answering note with tears,

Rings sweet. But I must feel

The parting of the flesh

Before the whetted steel.

CHORUS: Whence come these violent miseries, god-inspired

Yet void of meaning? Why with voice like doom

Intone these horrors in heart-searing words?

Who marked the oracular road

Whose evil terms you trace?

CASSANDRA (*changing from the shrill declamation of prophecy  
to the quiet sadness of mourning*)

O Paris and his passion!

O marriage-bed that slew

His family and city!

O sweet Scamander river

Our thirsting fathers knew,

By whose loved banks I grew!

But soon the dark Cocytus

And Acheron shall echo

My prophecies, and witness

Whether my words are true.

CHORUS Paris's marriage! This at last is clear

To any child. Yet in her muttered fear

Lies more than meets the sight:

With stunning pain, like a brute serpent's bite,

Her whispered cry crashes upon my ear.

CASSANDRA: O Ilion and her passion!

O city burnt and razed!

O fires my father kindled

To keep his towers defiant!

O blood of beasts he offered

From every herd that grazed!

Yet no propitiation

Could save her sons from dying

As I foretold they would;

And I will join my brothers,

And soon the ground will welcome

My warm and flowing blood.

CHORUS: Once more her utterance adds like to like.

Tell us, what god is he, so merciless,

Whose grievous hand can strike

Such deathly music from your mournful soul,

Arrows of prophecy whose course and goal

I seek, but cannot guess?



CASSANDRA: Then listen. Now my prophecy shall no more  
peep

From under shy veils like a new-made bride, but blow  
A bounding gale towards the sunrise, on whose surge  
A crime more fearful than my murder shall at once  
Sweep into blazing light. Without more mystery  
I will instruct you; but first testify how close  
I scent the trail of bloody guilt incurred long since.  
Under this roof live day and night a ghastly choir  
Venting their evil chant in hideous harmony;  
Drunk with men's blood, boldly established here,  
They hold unbroken revel, fiends of the blood royal, whom  
none

Can exorcize. Drinking they sit, and with their songs  
Drive folly first to crime; the crime performed, in turn  
They spew out the defiler of his brother's bed!  
Do I miss? Or has my arrow found a mark you know?  
Or am I 'lying prophet', 'gipsy', 'tale-spinner'?

Come, on your oath, bear witness: the foul history  
Of Atreus' palace, sin for sin, is known to me!  
CHORUS: The holiest oath could help but little. Yet I marvel  
That you, bred overseas in a foreign tongue, unfold  
Our city's past as truly as if you had been here.

CASSANDRA: Apollo, god of prophecy, gave me this office.

CHORUS: Did *he* lust for your mortal body, though a god?

CASSANDRA: Yes. Until now I was ashamed to speak of it.

CHORUS: We all are more reserved when we are prosperous.

CASSANDRA: He urged me hard, made warmest protest of his  
love.

CHORUS: And did you lie together? Had you child by him?

CASSANDRA: I gave my word, and broke it--to the God of  
Words.

CHORUS: Already god-possessed with the prophetic art?

CASSANDRA: I had foretold already the whole doom of Troy.

CHORUS: Surely the god was angry? Did he punish you?

CASSANDRA: After my sin, no one believed one word I spoke.

CHORUS: To us your prophecies seem all too credible.

CASSANDRA: Oh! Oh!

Horror and sin! Again the anguish of true vision--

Yes, sin and horror!--racks and ravages my brain.

Look! See them sit, there on the wall, like forms in dreams,

Children butchered like lambs by their own kindred. See,

What do they carry in their hands? O piteous sight!

It is their own flesh--limb and rib and heart they hold,

Distinct and horrible, the food their father ate!

I tell you, for this crime revenge grows hot: there lurks

In the home lair--as regent, say--a cowardly lion

Who plots against his master absent at the war;

While the Commander Lion who uprooted Troy,

Met by the fawning tongue, the bright obsequious ear,

Of the vile plotting she-hound, does not know what wounds

Venomed with hidden vengeance she prepares for him.

Female shall murder male: what kind of brazenness

Is that? What loathsome beast lends apt comparison?

A basilisk? Or Scylla's breed, living in rocks

To drown men in their ships--a raging shark of hell,

Dreaming of steel thrust at her husband's unarmed flesh?

You heard her superb bluff, that cry of triumph, raised

As if for a hard battle won, disguised as joy

At his safe home-coming? You are incredulous--

No matter--I say, no matter; what will come will come.

Soon you will see with your own eyes, and pity me,

And wish my prophecy had not been half so true.

CHORUS: Thyestes' feast of children's flesh we understand;

Horror gives place to wonder at your true account;  
The rest outstrips our comprehension; we give up.

CASSANDRA: I say Agamemnon shall lie dead before your eyes.

CHORUS: Silence, you wretched outcast--or speak wholesome words!

CASSANDRA: No wholesome word can purge the poison of that truth.

CHORUS: None, if it is to be; but may the gods forbid!

CASSANDRA: You turn to prayer: others meanwhile prepare to kill.

CHORUS: What man can be the source of such polluting sin?

CASSANDRA: What man? You miss the main point of my prophecies.

How could such murder be contrived? This baffles me.

CASSANDRA: Yet I speak good Greek--all too good.

CHORUS: The oracles  
Of Delphi are good Greek, but hard to understand.

CASSANDRA: Oh, oh! For pity, Apollo! Where can I escape?

This death you send me is impatient, merciless!

She, this lioness in human form, who when her lord  
Was absent paired with a wolf, will take my wretched life.

Like one who mixes medicine for her enemies,

Now, while she whets the dagger for her husband's heart,

She vows to drug his dram with a memory of me,

And make him pledge my safe arrival--in my blood.

This robe--why should I wear what mocks me? Why still keep

This scepter, these oracular garlands round my neck?

Before I die I'll make an end of you . . . and you . . .

Go, with my curse, go! Thus I pay my debt to you!

*She tramples them on the ground.*

Go, make some other woman rich in misery!

And let Apollo see, and witness what I do--

He who once saw me in these same insignia

Scorned, jeered at like some gipsy quack, by enemies

And friends alike, called starveling, beggar, conjuror,

Pitiable wretch--all this I bore; and now Apollo,

Who gave a portion of his own prescience to me,

Brings me from Ilion here to this death-reeking porch,

Where I shall never court crass unbelief again,

Where not my father's hearthstone but the slaughterer's block

Waits for me, warm already with a victim's blood.

Yet we shall not die unregarded by the gods.

A third shall come to raise our cause, a son resolved

To kill his mother, Honoring his father's blood.

He, now a wandering exile, shall return to set

The apex on this tower of crime his race has built.

A great oath, sealed in sight of gods, binds him to exact

Full penance for his father's corpse stretched dead in dust.

Why then should I lament? Am I so pitiable?

I have watched Fate unfold her pattern: Troy endured

What she endured; her captor now, by Heaven's decree,

Ends thus. I have done with tears. I will endure my death.

O gates of the dark world, I greet you as I come!

Let me receive, I pray, a single mortal stroke,

Sink without spasm, feel the warm blood's gentle ebb,

Embrace death for my comfort, and so close my eyes.

CHORUS: O woman deep in wisdom as in suffering,

You have told us much. Yet, if you have true foreknowledge

Of your own death, why, like an ox for sacrifice,

Move thus towards the altar with intrepid step?

CASSANDRA: Friends, there is no escape, none--once the hour  
has come.

CHORUS: Yet last to go gains longest time.

CASSANDRA: This is the day.  
Retreat wins little.

CHORUS: Courage and destiny in you  
Are proudly matched.

CASSANDRA: The happy never hear such praise.

CHORUS: Yet a brave death lends brightness to mortality.

CASSANDRA: O father! O my brothers! All your brightness  
dead!

I go. Now in the land of the defeated I  
Will mourn my end and Agamemnon's. I have lived.

*She goes towards the door; then with a cry turns back.*

CHORUS: What is it? What do you see? What terror turns you  
back?

CASSANDRA *gasps, with a sound of choking.*

CHORUS: You gasp, as if some nausea choked your very soul.

CASSANDRA: There is a smell of murder. The walls drip with  
blood.

CHORUS: The altar's ready. This is the smell of sacrifice.

CASSANDRA: It is most like the air that rises from a grave.

CHORUS: You mean the Syrian perfume sprinkled for the feast?

CASSANDRA: I am not like a bird scared at an empty bush,  
Trembling for nothing. Wait: when you shall see my death  
Atoned with death, woman for woman; when in place  
Of him whom marriage cursed another man shall fall:  
Then witness for me--these and all my prophecies

Were utter truth. This I request before I die.

CHORUS: To die is sad: sadder, to know death fore-ordained.

CASSANDRA: Yet one word more, a prophecy--or, if a dirge,  
At least not mine alone. In this sun's light--my last--  
I pray: when the sword's edge requites my captor's blood,  
Then may his murderers, dying, with that debt pay too  
For her they killed in chains, their unresisting prey!

Alas for human destiny! Man's happiest hours  
Are pictures drawn in shadow. Then ill fortune comes,  
And with two strokes the wet sponge wipes the drawing out.  
And grief itself's hardly more pitiable than joy.

*She goes into the palace.*

CHORUS: Of fortune no man tastes his fill.  
While pointing envy notes his store,  
And tongues extol his happiness,  
Man surfeited will hunger still.  
For who grows weary of success,  
Or turns good fortune from his door  
Bidding her trouble him no more?

Our king, whom Fortune loves to bless,  
By the gods' will has taken Troy,  
And Honor crowns his safe return.  
If now, for blood shed long ago,  
In penance due his blood must flow,  
And if his murderers must earn  
Death upon death, and Fate stands so,  
I ask, what mortal man can claim

That he alone was born to enjoy  
A quiet life, and an untarnished name?

*AGAMEMNON'S voice is heard from inside the palace.*

AGAMEMNON: Help, help! I am wounded, murdered, here in  
the inner room!

CHORUS: Hush, listen! Who cried 'Murder'? Do you know  
that voice?

AGAMEMNON: Help, help again! Murder--a second, mortal  
blow!

CHORUS: 1. That groan tells me the deed is done. It was the  
king.

Come, let's decide together on the safest plan.

2. This is what I advise--to send a herald round  
Bidding the citizens assemble here in arms.

3. Too slow. I say we should burst in at once, and catch  
Murder in the act, before the blood dries on the sword.

4. I share your feeling--that is what we ought to do,  
Or something of that kind. Now is the time to act.

5. It's plain what this beginning points to: the assassins  
Mean to establish a tyrannical regime.

6. Yes--while we talk and talk; but action, spurning sleep,  
Tramples the gentle face of caution in the dust.

7. I can suggest no plan that might prove practical.  
I say, let those who took this step propose the next.

8. I'm of the same opinion. If the king is dead,  
I know no way to make him live by argument.

9. Then shall we patiently drag out our servile years  
Governed by these disgraces of our royal house?

10. No, no! Intolerable! Who would not rather die?--  
A milder fate than living under tyranny!

11. Wait; not too fast. What is our evidence? Those groans?  
Are we to prophesy from them that the king's dead?

12. We must be certain; this excitement's premature.  
Guessing and certain knowledge are two different things.

CHORUS: I find this view supported on all sides: that we  
Make full enquiry what has happened to the king.

*The palace doors open, revealing CLYTEMNESTRA.  
At her feet AGAMEMNON lies dead, in a silver bath,  
and wrapped in a voluminous purple robe. On his  
body lies CASSANDRA, also dead.*

CLYTEMNESTRA: I said, not long since, many things to  
match the time;

All which, that time past, without shame I here unsay.

How else, when one prepares death for an enemy  
Who seems a friend--how else net round the deadly trap  
High enough to forestall the victim's highest leap?

A great while I have pondered on this trial of strength.

At long last the pitched battle came, and victory:

Here where I struck I stand and see my task achieved.

Yes, this is my work, and I claim it. To prevent

Flight or resistance foiling death, I cast on him,

As one who catches fish, a vast voluminous net,

That walled him round with endless wealth of woven folds;

And then I struck him, twice. Twice he cried out and groaned;

And then fell limp. And as he lay I gave a third

And final blow, my thanks for prayers fulfilled, to Zeus,

Lord of the lower region, Savior--of dead men!

So filling he belched forth his life; with cough and retch

There spurted from him bloody foam in a fierce jet,

And spreading, spattered me with drops of crimson rain;

While I exulted as the sown cornfield exults  
Drenched with the dew of heaven when buds burst forth in  
Spring.

So stands the case, Elders of Argos. You may be  
As you choose, glad or sorry; I am jubilant.  
And, were it seemly over a *dead* man to pour  
Thank offering for safe journey, surely Justice here  
Allows it, here demands it; so enriched a wine  
Of wickedness this man stored in his house, and now  
Returned, drains his own cursed cup to the last dregs.  
CHORUS: The brute effrontery of your speech amazes us.  
To boast so shamelessly over your husband's corpse!  
CLYTEMNESTRA: You speak as to some thoughtless woman:  
you are wrong.  
My pulse beats firm. I tell what you already know:  
Approve or censure, as you will; all's one to me.  
This is my husband, Agamemnon, now stone dead;  
His death the work of my right hand, whose craftsmanship  
Justice acknowledges. There lies the simple truth.

CHORUS: Vile woman! What unnatural food or drink,  
Malignant root, brine from the restless sea,  
Transformed you, that your nature did not shrink  
From foulest guilt? Argos will execrate  
Your nameless murder with one voice of hate,  
Revoke your portion with the just and free,  
And drive you outlawed from our Argive gate.  
CLYTEMNESTRA: Yes! Now you righteously mulct *me* with  
banishment,  
Award me public curses, roars of civic hate.  
Why, once before, did you not dare oppose this man?  
Who with as slight compunction as men butcher sheep,

When his own fields were white with flocks, must sacrifice  
His child, and my own darling, whom my pain brought forth--  
He killed her for a charm to stop the Thracian wind!  
He was the one you should have driven from Argos; he,  
Marked with his daughter's blood, was ripe for punishment.  
But *my* act shocks your ears, whets your judicial wrath!  
Your threats doubtless rely on force--you have your men  
And weapons: try your strength in fair fight against mine.  
Win, and you may command me. If--please Heaven--you lose,  
Old as you are, you shall be taught some wisdom yet.  
CHORUS: Such boasts show folly in a crafty mind.  
So surely as your robe blazons your crime  
In those red drops, shall your own head bow low  
Under a bloody stroke. Wait but the time:  
Friendless, dishonored, outcast, you shall find  
Your debt fall due, and suffer blow for blow.  
CLYTEMNESTRA: Is it so? Then you shall hear the righteous  
oath I swear.  
By Justice, guardian of my child, now perfected;  
By her avenging Fury, at whose feet I poured  
His blood: I have no fear that *his* avenger's tread  
Shall shake this house, while my staunch ally now as then,  
Aegisthus, kindles on my hearth the ancestral fire.  
With such a shield, strength marches boldly on. Meanwhile,  
He who was sweet to every Trojan Chryseis,  
And soured my life, lies here; with him his prisoner,  
His faithful soothsayer, who shared his berth, and knew  
Sailors' lasciviousness; their ends both richly earned.  
He--as you see him; she first, like the dying swan,  
Sang her death-song, and now lies in her lover's clasp.  
Brought as a variant to the pleasures of my bed,  
She lends an added relish now to victory.

CHORUS: Come, look on him, and weep.  
 O that some merciful swift fate,  
 Not wasting-sick nor wry with pain,  
 Would bid me share his ever-endless sleep!  
 Low lies the kindly guardian of our State,  
 Who fought ten years to win  
 Redress for woman's sin;  
 Now by a woman slain.  
 Helen! Infatuate Helen! You who spilt  
 Beneath Troy's wall lives without number! You  
 Now on your house have fixed a lasting guilt  
 Which every age will tell anew.  
 Surely, that day you fled beyond recall,  
 A curse of grief already grew  
 Deep-rooted in this royal hall.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA: Is fact so gross a burden?  
 Put up no prayers for death;  
 Nor turn your spleen on Helen,  
 As if her act had ordered  
 The fate of fighting thousands  
 And robbed their souls of breath;  
 Or from her fault alone  
 Such cureless grief had grown.  
 CHORUS: Spirit of hate, whose strong curse weighs  
 Hard on the house and heirs of Tantalus,  
 Your power it is engenders thus  
 In woman's brain such evil art,  
 And darkens all my bitter days.  
 It is your hateful form I see rejoice,  
 Standing like crow on carrion; your voice  
 Whose execrable song affronts both ear and heart.  
 CLYTEMNESTRA: You now speak more in wisdom,

Naming the thrice-gored Fury  
 That hates and haunts our race.  
 Hers is the thirst of slaughter,  
 Still slaked with feud and vengeance,  
 Till, with each wrong requited,  
 A new thirst takes its place.  
 CHORUS: This grievous power whose wrath you celebrate  
 With cursed truth, no royal house's fall,  
 No mad catastrophe, can ever sate.  
 O piteous mystery! Is Zeus not lord?  
 Zeus, Zeus, alas ! doer and source of all?  
 Could even this horror be, without his sovereign word?

Sad, silent king! How shall I mourn your death?  
 How find the heart's true word, to prove me friend?  
 Here where you spent your dying breath,  
 Caught by the ruthless falsehood of a wife,  
 In the foul spider's web fast bound you lie.  
 Unholy rest, and most ignoble end--  
 That man like beast should die  
 Pierced with a two-edged knife!

CLYTEMNESTRA: This murder's mine, you clamor.  
 I was his wife; but henceforth  
 My name from his be freed!  
 Dressed in my form, a phantom  
 Of vengeance, old and bitter,  
 On that obscene host, Atreus,  
 For his abhorrent deed,  
 Has poured this blood in payment,  
 That here on Justice' altar  
 A man for babes should bleed.  
 CHORUS: And are you guiltless? Some revengeful Power

Stood, maybe, at your side; but of this blood  
Who will, who could absolve you? Hour by hour  
On his unyielding course the black-robed King,  
Pressing to slaughter, swells the endless flood  
Of crimson life by pride and hate released  
From brothers' veins--till the due reckoning,  
When the dried gore shall melt, and Ares bring  
Justice at last for that unnatural feast.

CLYTEMNESTRA: The guile I used to kill him  
He used himself the first,  
When he by guile uprooted  
The tender plant he gave me,  
And made this house accurst.  
When on my virgin daughter  
His savage sword descended,  
My tears in rivers ran;  
If now by savage sword-thrust  
His ageing days are ended,  
Let shame and conscience ban  
His boasts, where he pays forfeit  
For wrong his guile began.

CHORUS: Where, where lies Right? Reason despairs her  
powers,  
Mind numbly gropes, her quick resources spent.  
Our throne endangered, and disaster near,  
Where can I turn? I fear  
Thunder that cracks foundations, blood-red showers;  
The light rain slacks--the deluge is in store.  
Justice, in harmony with Fate's intent,  
Hardens her hold to shake the earth once more.

O earth, O earth! Would that some timely chance

Had laid me in your lap, before my eyes  
Had seen him laid so low,  
Lord of this silver-walled inheritance!  
Who will inter him? Who lament the dead?  
Will *you* wear mourning for disguise?  
Bewail the husband whom your own hand killed?  
For his high glories offer gifts of lies?  
Since Justice answers, No!  
By whom shall tears of honest love be shed,  
His grave side ritual of praise fulfilled?  
CLYTEMNESTRA: That question's not your business.  
I felled him; I dispatched him;  
And I will earth his bones.  
No troops from house or city  
Shall beat their breasts and lay him  
In vaults of bronze and marble  
With seemly civic groans.  
But, as is fit, his daughter  
Shall meet him near the porch way  
Of those who perished young;  
His loved Iphigenia  
With loving arms shall greet him,  
And gagged and silent tongue.  
CHORUS: Reproach answers reproach; truth darkens still.  
She strikes the striker; he who dared to kill  
Pays the full forfeit. While Zeus holds his throne,  
This maxim holds on earth: *the sinner dies*.  
That is God's law. Oh, who can exorcize  
This breeding curse, this canker that has grown  
Into these walls, to plague them at its will?  
CLYTEMNESTRA: *The sinner dies*: you have reached the  
truth at last.

Now to the Powers that persecute  
Our race I offer a sworn pact:  
With this harsh deed and bitter fact  
*I* am content; let *them* forget the past,  
Leave us for ever, and oppress  
Some other house with murderous wickedness.  
I ask no weight of wealth;  
For me it will suffice  
To purchase, at this price,  
For our long sickness, health.

Enter AEGISTHUS.

AEGISTHUS: O happy day, when Justice comes into her  
own!

Now I believe that gods, who dwell above the earth,  
See what men suffer, and award a recompense:  
Here, tangled in a net the avenging Furies wove,  
He lies, a sight to warm my heart; and pays his blood  
In full atonement for his father's treacherous crime.

Here is the story plain. There was dispute between  
Atreus, Agamemnon's father, who ruled Argos then,  
And my father Thyestes, his own brother; whom  
Atreus drove out from home and city. He came back;  
Sat as a piteous suppliant at Atreus' hearth;  
Gained his request--in part: his own blood did not stain  
His childhood's home. But Atreus, this man's father, gave  
His guest, my father, a host's gift; a gift more full  
Of eagerness than love. He feigned a feasting-day,  
And amidst lavish meats served him his own sons' flesh.

The feet and the splayed fingers he concealed, putting  
The other parts, unrecognizably chopped small,  
Above them. Each guest had his table; and this dish  
Was set before my father. He, in ignorance,  
At once took that which prompted no close scrutiny,  
And tasted food from which, as you now see, our house  
Has not recovered. Then he recognized, in all  
Its loathsomeness, what had been done. With one deep groan,  
Back from his chair, vomiting murdered flesh, he fell;  
Cursed Pelops' race with an inexorable curse;  
With his foot sent the table crashing wide, and screamed,  
'So crash to ruin the whole house of Tantalus!'

That deed gave birth to what you now see here, this death.  
I planned his killing, as was just: I was the third  
Child of Thyestes, then a brat in baby-clothes;  
Spared, and sent off with my distracted father, till,  
Full-grown, justice restored me to my native land.  
I, from a distance, plotted this whole evil snare,  
And caught my man. Thus satisfied, I could die now,  
Seeing Agamemnon in the trap of justice, dead.

CHORUS: Aegisthus, we acquit you of insults to the dead.  
But since you claim that you alone laid the whole plot,  
And thus, though absent, took his blood upon your hands,  
I tell you plainly, your own life is forfeited;  
Justice will curse you, Argive hands will stone you dead.  
AEGISTHUS: So, this is how you lecture, from the lower deck,  
The master on the bridge? Then you shall learn, though old,  
How harsh a thing is discipline, when reverend years  
Lack wisdom. Chains and the distress of hunger are  
A magic medicine, of great power to school the mind.  
Does not this sight bid you reflect? Then do not kick



Against the goad, lest you should stumble, and be hurt.

CHORUS: You woman! While he went to fight, you stayed at home;

Seduced his wife meanwhile; and then, against a man Who led an army, you could scheme this murder! Pah!

AEGISTHUS: You still use words that have in them the seed of tears.

Your voice is most unlike the voice of Orpheus: he Bound all who heard him with delight; your childish yelps Annoy us, and will fasten bonds on you yourselves. With hard control you will prove more amenable.

CHORUS : Control! Are we to see you king of Argos--you, Who, after plotting the king's murder, did not dare To lift the sword yourself?

AEGISTHUS: To lure him to the trap Was plainly woman's work; I, an old enemy, Was suspect. Now, helped by his wealth, I will attempt To rule in Argos. The refractory shall not Be fed fat like show-horses, but shall feel the yoke-- A heavy one. Hunger and darkness joined will soon Soften resistance.

CHORUS: Then, if you're so bold, why not Yourself with your own hands plunder your enemy? Instead, a woman, whose life makes this earth unclean And flouts the gods of Argos, helped you murder him! Oh, does Orestes live? Kind Fortune, bring him home, To set against these two his sword invincible!

AEGISTHUS: Then, since your treason's militant, you shall soon learn

That it is foolish to insult authority.  
Ready, there! Forward, guards!

*Armed soldiers rush in.*

Here's work for you. Each man

Handle his sword.

CHORUS: Our swords are ready. We can die.

AEGISTHUS: 'Die'! We accept the omen. Fortune hold the stakes!

CLYTEMNESTRA: Stop, stop, Aegisthus, dearest! No more violence!

When this first harvest ripens we'll reap grief enough.

Crime and despair are fed to bursting; let us not

Plunge deeper still in blood. Elders, I beg of you,

Yield in good time to Destiny; go home, before

You come to harm; what we have done was fore-ordained.

If our long agony finds here fulfillment, we,

Twice gored by Fate's long talons, welcome it. I speak

With woman's wisdom, if you choose to understand.

AEGISTHUS: Then are these gross-tongued men to aim their pointed gibes

At random, and bluff out the fate they've richly earned?

CHORUS: You'll find no Argive grovel at a blackguard's feet.

AEGISTHUS: Enough! Some later day I'll settle scores with you.

CHORUS: Not if Fate sets Orestes on the Argos road.

AEGISTHUS: For men in exile hopes are meat and drink; I know.

CHORUS: Rule on, grow fat defiling Justice--while you can.

AEGISTHUS: You are a fool; in time you'll pay me for those words.

CHORUS: Brag blindly on--a cock that struts before his hen!

*During these last lines the CHORUS have gone out two  
by two, the last man vanishing with the last insult,  
leaving CLYTEMNESTRA and AEGISTHUS alone.*

CLYTEMNESTRA: Pay no heed to this currish howling.  
You and I,  
Joint rulers, will enforce due reverence for our throne.